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COFFEE COUNTY, ALABAMA

Reserve

Deep in the southeastern corner of Alabama are 675 square miles of farming land which are attracting more than their share of attention all over the United States. The land is Coffee County, and the attention is drawn by a coordinated Government effort to bring security and decent living within the reach of that county's 35,000 rural people.

The story of Coffee County up to 1935 is the story of many another southern district--the story of cash-cropping and erosion, of bad health and poor education, of insecure tenure and dependence on relief, of submarginal land and migration born of desperation. The story was worse than most, for in 1935 nearly everybody in the county was on or near relief, almost every farm family was deeply in debt to the local banks and "furnish merchants," and most banks and merchants themselves were bankrupt or nearly so.

Case History of a Sick County

Originally, Coffee County had few desirable settlement areas, and was largely covered with pine forests and swamps. The early settlers were poor farmers, who bought land from the Government at 12 cents an acre and raised sheep and cattle along the riverbanks. The pioneers did not push back into the wooded regions away from the streams because they believed the soil there to be worthless.

It was not until shortly before the turn of the century that the back lands, opened up by lumbering and turpentine interests, were found to be well suited for cotton and corn. Hundreds of small farms, most of them depending on cotton for their entire income, appeared in the cut-over regions. However, the small farmers who cleared the virgin tracts and built themselves dwellings fared poorly. Many of them soon lost ownership of their land, as cash-crop farming on small units proved unprofitable. Owners became tenants, and the erosion and other effects of continuous cash-cropping continued to impoverish the larger units. Early in 1917 the boll weevil entered southern Alabama from New Mexico and Texas, destroying half the cotton crop in Coffee County. The next year the weevil finished the job, and caused a complete failure.

Things looked about as black as they could when a merchant in the town of Enterprise, who had failed to collect debts from cotton farmers, obtained some seed peanuts and made a contract with one of his debtors to plant them. He promised the farmer a fancy price for the peanuts and it is reported the farmer cleared \$2,000 on that one crop. The same merchant then established a peanut mill in Enterprise and offered to buy all the peanuts the growers could produce.

By 1920, 50,000 acres of peanuts were harvested in the vicinity of Enterprise. The crop that year brought about \$5,000,000, compared to an average income of \$1,000,000 from cotton previously harvested in the same area. A large part of the peanut crop was used as feed for hogs, and a thriving pork industry came into being. A monument was erected to the boll weevil, because folks felt that the pest was the cause of the shift in the farming economy to include peanuts as a money crop.

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Peanuts did not mean permanent prosperity, however. Harvesting peanuts by digging diminishes the soil fertility at a most rapid rate, unless extra emphasis is placed on real soil-conservation practices. Furthermore, pork fed solely on peanuts does not have quite the quality of corn-fed pork. By 1930 hog prices had dropped, generally, with the advancing agricultural depression. By 1935 over three-fourths of all the county's farmers were tenants, and one-third of all the white farmers were sharecroppers. About 60,000 acres, or one-fifth of the entire area of the county, had been foreclosed by the New Orleans Land Bank. Coffee County had struck a new low.

It was in 1935 that the Resettlement Administration, predecessor to the Farm Security Administration, was created to deal with the problem of the low-income farmer. In the same year, the 60,000 acres of foreclosed farm land, which had been bought from the Land Bank by the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, were turned over to Resettlement and the project known as Coffee County Farms was started.

The Government Sizes Up Its Problem

From the outset the necessity for a coordinated program was recognized by the many different public agencies interested in the development of Coffee County. Bureaus and officials on every level of Government stood ready with the Resettlement Administration to work out a program under which the county could get back on its feet. The local school, health, and welfare officers were anxious to cooperate. The town and county commissioners saw the need for immediate action. State health, educational, and agricultural experts offered their services. And from the Federal Government, the Soil Conservation Service, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Forest Service, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Extension Service, and Experiment Stations of the Department of Agriculture sent representatives to the area.

The first step was, of course, to map out the problems and plan the solutions. This meant a comprehensive survey of the entire county. Soil experts went over every foot of land and found that many thousands of acres, including 37,000 of the 60,000 acres held by the Government, were marginal or submarginal land and should be retired to pasture or forest. The soils in the county, mostly light sandy loams, were found to be fairly productive but highly susceptible to erosion. Consequently many of the farms had been drained of their natural fertility by farmers ignorant of crop rotation and pressed for cash to pay off their debts.

Farm management experts studied the agricultural operations in the area. They discovered that most of the poverty-stricken farmers made no attempt to grow food for themselves on their land. They found also that there was a large deficiency of livestock of every kind, and that what little livestock was owned by Coffee County farmers was of exceedingly poor quality.

A survey of the human resources of the county brought into stronger relief the need for immediate action. Diets were scanty, unbalanced, and poorly prepared. Hundreds of dwellings were insanitary and badly in need of repair. The prevalence of malaria and pellagra was high, and two-thirds of the children in the entire county had hookworm, according to a survey conducted by the Health

Department. The average person in Coffee County had completed only three and a half grades of elementary school; and high school training was almost unknown. In 25 percent of the farm homes, one or both parents were illiterate.

Planning for County Rehabilitation

Coffee County clearly was not a place where ordinary local Government could turn the tide of poverty and insecurity. Accordingly, W. L. McArthur, county project manager for the Resettlement Administration, began the huge job of starting a coordinated program of "area planning" by calling a meeting of the field representatives of the various interested agencies. Out of this meeting grew the Coffee County Workers Council. Agencies represented in the Coffee County Council include the Agricultural Extension Service, Vocational Agriculture and Home Economics Service, County Department of Public Welfare, County Educational Department, County Recreational Unit, County Health Unit, and the County FSA Unit.

The Council, which meets the second Friday afternoon in each month, acts as a coordinating agency, advises and recommends steps to be taken by the agencies vested with authority to carry them out. Although the Council has no official authority to determine policies, its individual members do represent the agencies which have the power to take effective action in their respective fields. Through discussion, the members can fit their partial programs into a broad, informal plan on which the Council as a whole can agree.

The work of each agency is thus conducted in its customary fashion and with its customary personnel; it is simply made more effective by the help of other agencies working in the same direction. The knotty problem of keying together the work of several different authorities has been solved by this process of informal cooperation.

Loans for Rehabilitation

Since 1935 the Farm Security Administration has been making rehabilitation loans to needy American farm families which cannot get credit from any other source. FSA helps its borrowers to work out better farming methods, under which they produce as much of their living as possible from their own land, plus enough cash income to pay off the debt to the Government.

The heart of the whole Coffee County plan lies in this program of rehabilitation loans. More than six hundred such loans have been made, and one-third of the families receiving them have been able to move from tumble-down shacks to new or rebuilt dwellings, erected by FSA on Government-owned land. Two hundred and fifty-eight houses were built by the Government at an average cost of only \$1,505 each, but construction did not stop with the building of houses. Each family's unit includes a barn, smokehouse, poultry-house, sanitary privy, and sometimes other buildings, as well as a water supply system, improvements to the land, and a fenced-in garden. The total cost per unit, including land, averaged \$5,455.

From July 1935 through June 30, 1939, 621 families had borrowed a total of \$332,543 in rehabilitation loans. Everyone of these farmers, in consultation

with the farm management supervisor, made out a farm plan by which he would be able to produce on the farm most of the food his family needed, and still make enough cash for necessities and to pay off his obligation to the Government. Similarly, the farmer's wife made out a management plan for the home, including an agreement to can at least 80 quarts of food every year for each member of the family.

The money advanced during the first year of the project did not exhaust the loan program in Coffee County. Supplemental loans had to be made in a good many instances. Often at the end of its first crop year the family had increased its net worth, increased its facilities for making a second crop, and even paid off the first installment on its debt to the Government, but it had no cash with which to buy seed and fertilizer to carry it over until the next harvest. In cases like this, supplemental loans were made.

Moreover, as additional units were constructed or new farm families became eligible to receive rehabilitation loans, new loans were made. In 1939, for example, loans were made to 169 "project" clients--that is, to families who had moved onto Government land and were living in the houses built by the Government. "Project" loans amounted to \$56,816, or an average of approximately \$366 per family. In the same period, a total of 391 "standard" rehabilitation loans were made. These loans were extended to farm families who were unable to move to one of the units constructed by FSA; most of them, indeed, remained on the land which they occupied before getting the loan. The "standard" loans totaled \$209,935 and averaged about \$537 for each family. Of these two types of loan families, 25 "project" families and 256 "standard" families were receiving loans for the first time in 1939.

In addition, 256 sanitation grants were made, averaging about \$25 each. Other grants were made to enable families to meet some emergency medical expense. In 1939, two grants were extended to defray burial costs.

Planning for Farms and Homes

The farm management plan for Coffee County is built around the 126 tracts improved by the Government and situated on something over 20,000 acres of Government land. On these tracts are 150 two-horse units with about 60 tillable acres each; 17 three-horse units with 90 acres fit for crop production, and 33 one-horse units with 35 crop acres each. The average size of all project farms is 111 acres, including all land.

Decreasing emphasis on the growing of soil-depleting cash crops does not mean that those crops are not still important products. Cotton and peanuts continue to be the dominant cash crops, with about one-third of the peanut crop "hogged off" for pork production. But corn, oats, hay, peas, soybeans, cane, sweet potatoes, and winter legumes have also gained a place in Coffee County agriculture. According to the 1938 performance reports of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 190,540 acres of cropland in Coffee County were planted as follows: Corn, 44 percent; cotton, 19 percent; peanuts, 21 percent. The remaining 16 percent was in small crops, grown largely for subsistence or for local sale.

Farmers receiving rehabilitation loans agree to certain simple, common sense conditions. They agree to follow approved farming practices, such as crop rotation and terracing. In the case of each farmer, a certain acreage is set aside for garden vegetables, another for feed crops for the livestock and poultry, and another for pasturage. There is a field in cash crops for the market, and another in a cover crop, which would be rotated with others to build up the soil and prevent erosion. They further agree to keep careful track of their costs and expenses, so that they can tell at the end of the year how their farm plan worked out in practice. In making out the plan and in following it throughout the year, the farmers have the constant guidance and advice of the farm management supervisor.

The farm wives also agree to preserve enough fruits and vegetables grown on the farm to provide an adequate, well-balanced diet the year around. Farm Security advisers encourage the purchase of pressure cookers, either individually or cooperatively, and for the first time the loan families in Coffee County are building up an ample food supply by canning the produce from their own gardens.

During 1938 the loan families canned an average of 301 quarts of fruits and vegetables per family. The average of these same families before coming on the program had been 107 quarts, and many of the families had never before canned a single quart for home consumption. A survey in 1939 of 69 families who had been on the project for only a year showed that they increased the quarts of food preserved by 243 percent in that one year. Five canning plants for community use have been set up in the county. During spring and summer of 1939, 18,000 quarts of vegetables and fruits were canned for home use at the five locations. Indications are this number will be increased to some 35,000 quarts by January 1, 1941. This canning is in addition to the regular canning budget handled by FSA families at home with their pressure cookers.

Education of a County

Education in rural areas has always been a serious problem in this country. Facilities are generally poor; yet at the same time the number of children of school age is usually considerably higher than in urban communities. School districts and other local governmental units, handicapped by the relatively small amount of tax money available to them for education, are often unable to keep the buildings in repair or pay adequate salaries to teachers. Consequently, school terms in rural districts are shorter, and attendance rates consistently lower, than for the country as a whole.

When the Coffee County project was started, there was a staff of one county agent, one home demonstration agent, two vocational agriculture workers and two vocational home economics workers handling all farm and home educational work in the county. This staff was soon expanded to include assistants to both the county agent and the home demonstration agent, and in addition six teachers of vocational agriculture and six teachers of vocational home economics. Two of the twelve vocational teachers were Negroes—one agricultural expert and one home economist. Half of the twelve new teachers were assigned to work in the school buildings and the rest worked in the field, making house-to-house visits and talking over each farmer's individual problems in his own home.

The educational program in Coffee County has been an object lesson in co-operation among different agencies. Prior to 1935, the State Department of Education had decided that all existing schools in Coffee County should be improved. Discussion with representatives of Federal agencies, and study of Soil Conservation Service maps, revealed that two of the areas in which improvement of school facilities was planned were mostly submarginal land, and that plans were already afoot to move a large part of the population from those areas into districts where family-type farming on good land was possible. Thus the expensive improvement of buildings in areas soon to be depopulated was avoided through informal conversations based on results of an actual survey.

School buildings are necessary not only for strictly educational work, but as the most logical community centers in rural communities with scattered populations. Accordingly, it was with the whole community in view that the Farm Security Administration built three new schools and rebuilt a fourth, in districts where new farms and homes were being created. A bond-issue was subscribed by the local people to help pay for new school facilities. These buildings were then turned over to the local authorities to staff and operate. In them the boys have workshops where they are taught to repair plow shafts, work with iron, make tools, and build furniture. The girls learn home arts in fully-equipped home economics rooms. High attendance figures demonstrate that children are eager to come to school if they believe there is something really worth while to come for.

Perhaps the most striking instance of the way in which the Workers Council works is the use in Coffee County schools of problems related directly to the county's farm management plans. Children in a seventh-grade arithmetic class are not asked to work with abstract figures. They are given down-to-earth problems like the following:

"Cured pork sells for 30 cents a pound, but it can be raised on the farm for $17\frac{1}{2}$ cents. Find the saving a farm family can make in a year by raising its own hogs, if it requires 328 pounds of meat a year to feed the family."

"Farmer Brown has a 300-acre farm, 200 acres of which are in cultivation. Under the 1937 Agricultural Conservation Program a base acreage of 60 acres of cotton was established with a corresponding yield of 187 pounds of cotton per acre. What is Farmer Brown's base production?"

The vocational farm and home personnel, the county health officer, the sanitary engineer, and the three nurses each compile ten questions a month on actual problems with which they have to deal in their daily routine. These are submitted to the county Superintendent of Education, who edits them and has them mimeographed for the seventh-grade teachers throughout the county. This type of teaching has aroused a surprising amount of interest among the pupils.

Building Health for Rehabilitation

Before the Coffee County Workers Council began its activities, there was one Public Nurse charged with serving the county's 35,000 people. Even after

the Government had come into the county there were only three nurses. But after 1935, health was for the first time recognized to be the responsibility of every agency working in the area. The coming of sufficient food for the whole family's winter supply is emphasized by the home management supervisors. FSA loans finance a group health plan for the county. Solidly constructed houses and sanitary privies cut down the amount of serious disease.

The school authorities help the nurses and doctors by checking up on the health of school-age children and allowing clinics for hookworm and other treatments to be held in the school buildings as part of the regular educational machinery. Information on sanitation, hygiene, housing, diet, and clothing is distributed through the schools, the vocational teachers, and the extension workers. Community meetings are held in the school buildings to discuss health problems affecting the entire county.

The health problem was a gigantic one for a small staff to handle but they attacked it with determination. In 1938 alone, 5,208 treatments were given for typhoid, 1,256 for diphtheria, and 4,719 for venereal diseases. A general physical and health examination was made of all school children and over 400 treatments for hookworm were administered to FSA children; 900 people were vaccinated for smallpox, and 5,143 examinations and X-rays were made for tuberculosis.

With the cooperation of the county medical association a group health plan was set up in January 1938. It was called the Coffee County Health Association and in its first year attracted a membership of 307 families, or 1,653 people. The county's 16 doctors were anxious to make it a model medical association, and it has been notably successful.

Members pay average dues of \$27.15 a year per family to the association. All the dues are put into a common fund. When any member is sick he simply goes to any one of the county's doctors who is cooperating in the medical plan. At the end of the month each doctor bills the association for the service he has given to any of its members during that month. If the association does not have enough money to cover all the bills, they are reduced pro rata until the total is equal to that month's dues.

During the first year of operation, these dues, totalling \$8,334, paid for 918 visits made to homes of members by doctors; 1,717 visits made by members to doctors' offices; medical service to 913 persons during the year; and hospitalization and/or surgery for 78 members. Surgical and hospital bills were paid in full the first year, and country doctors, who formerly had been fortunate if they could collect 25 cents on the dollar, received 74 percent payment on their bills.

Adequate medical care is essential to rehabilitation. Before the intensive program got under way in Coffee County, hundreds of children died before reaching the age of five, and an unbelievable number of mothers died at childbirth. After a few years of group medical care and intensive effort by the State Department of Health, infant mortality in the county had dropped from 55 to 19 deaths per 1,000 live births, and deaths of mothers at childbirth from 10.4 to 6.6 deaths per 1,000 live births.

County Becomes a Community

Rehabilitation in the truest sense means not only providing an opportunity for unfortunate people to get enough to eat and wear, but making it possible for them to get together with their neighbors and develop some kind of community life, whether based on economic necessity or on social activities. Marketing, purchasing, medical, and many other cooperatives bring the farmers together on the economic side. The development of a social community has been aided by the provision of adequate school buildings for meetings. Picnic areas have been cleared for community use, where plate dinners and barbecues can be held by neighboring farm families. In addition, smaller group meetings, such as quilting bees, sewing circles, and community canning are encouraged.

For the children, recreation is built around extra-curricular activities in connection with the school; teams are organized in various sports; plays are put on. The success of the local 4-H Club is indicated by a paragraph from a report by the county project manager: "As a general proposition the boys and girls are taking an active interest in 4-H Club work, and school attendance has improved. There is a spirit of cooperation between the vocational agencies in the county and meetings are being held and schools conducted for both men and women. As a result of this activity, the adults are taking an active interest in church and social affairs."

Costs and Values

How does the Coffee County balance sheet look? Development and operation of the project up to the middle of 1938, when the construction phase was finished, cost a total of \$1,749,055.40. Coffee County has cost the Government something like half a million dollars a year since the beginning of the project. Much of this cost, of course, is in loans which will be repaid, and in construction, which is now finished, and will not have to be incurred in future years on such a scale. Nevertheless, the project has cost money. What has become of it?

Part of the return from Government activity in the county can be measured in monetary terms. Figures published in 1939 showed that families who had been on the project for one year had increased their net worth by an average of \$245 each. The comparable figure for families who had been on the project for two years was \$356. The families who had been on the project three years, from 1936 to 1939; had increased their average net worth from \$502 to \$1,070, an increase of \$568, or 113 percent. The project families increased the value of their home produce from an average of \$87 before receiving FSA loans to about \$200 in 1939, an increase of 230 percent.

By June 30, 1939, FSA had helped 35 farmers to secure debt adjustment through settlement with creditors, obtaining a total reduction of \$8,829, or 12 percent of the original debt. In 1938 alone, 40 project families sold hogs for the first time in their lives. There was an increase for all project families of one-third in value of feed and seed. In 1938 the project families had three times as much food and eight times as much cash as they had before the Government took a hand.

But the most complete compilation of this type of statistics could never tell the whole story of Coffee County's "asset" column, for the net effect of coordinated

Government effort in that county cannot be measured in dollars and percentages alone. There are some facts which it is impossible to show by any meaningful statistics. Over 600 farm families have had an opportunity to get on their feet with Government assistance. Educational, health, and recreational facilities have been provided for an entire county. Soils are being built rather than mined. Above all, people in Coffee County have more to look forward to than ever before --enough to eat, a plot of land which is not deteriorating from year to year, a livable home, education for their children, and a degree of security for themselves.

Nor should the value of experimentation in the field of county and area planning be overlooked. One of the most difficult problems in modern government is the coordination in the field of agencies with different jobs and different methods. To the extent that the Coffee County Workers Council has accomplished this coordination, it has aided the development of many another similar project, and has demonstrated both the necessity and the feasibility of government planning for the achievement of social objectives.

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